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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - ARS Chairman Leads Delegation into Somalia

REF: A) Patterson-Garey emails B) Djibouti 840

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On November 1, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, Chairman of the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), led an eight-person delegation into Somalia. Encouraged by A/S Frazer during a recent meeting in Nairobi to demonstrate leadership on the ground (Ref A), the ARS Chairman made his first trip into the country in over two years. Sharif began in Jowhar where he is rallying support for the Djibouti Agreement, promoting a unity government, and preparing to implement the cease-fire agreement signed between the Somali government and ARS on October 26. The delegation, comprised of key members of the High Level Committee and the Joint Security Committee, has been well-received, though they have also been threatened by hard-liners. Sharif is engaged in private talks with groups from Mogadishu, most associated with the Islamic Courts. Although Sharif had planned to stay in Jowhar only for a few hours, his arrival in Beletweyn has been delayed by rains, which have made the Hiran regional airport inaccessible. The ARS delegation plans to leave Jowhar on November 4 and remain in Beletweyn for at least a week, and maybe more depending on the support they receive. End Summary.

ARS Leaders Return
to Advocate Peace

¶2. (SBU) On November 1, ARS Chairman Sheikh Sharif led an eight-person delegation into Somalia. It was Sharif's first visit to the country in over two years, since the fall of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006. They began in Jowhar, the provincial capital of Middle Shabelle region, 90 km north of Mogadishu, and a stronghold during Sharif's leadership of the ICU. In public speeches, Sharif rallied support for the Djibouti Agreement, encouraged the establishment of a unity government, and talked about creating the conditions within the ARS and the Islamic Courts to implement the October 26 ceasefire agreement. Sharif is also holding a series of closed-door discussions with local elders and religious leaders, some of whom have come from Mogadishu to engage in talks. Our contacts have told us the delegation has been warmly received and some media reports suggest the same.

¶3. (SBU) The eight-member delegation, led by Sharif, comprises key ARS leaders, most of whom are associated with the Islamic Courts faction of the ARS. Most of the delegation members are from the Hawiye clan that dominates central Somalia. They include Joint Security Committee Chairman Omar Hashi Aden, the former ICU Secretary for Internal Affairs, a former military colonel and regional administrator in the Siad Barre regime. Hashi is extremely influential in Beletweyn, and within his sub-clan (Hawiye/Hawadle). Hashi's participation in the Djibouti Process was regarded by many as a key turning point to gaining the support of military commanders in the field. He played an active role in the Joint Security

Committee's negotiations that finally led to the signature of a cessation of armed confrontation agreement (Ref B).

¶4. (SBU) Also part of the delegation is Ahmed Abdullahi Sheikh, ARS information secretary and the former director of the Formal Private Education Network that operated most of the primary and secondary schools in Mogadishu prior to the fall of the ICU. Ahmed Abdullahi, an ARS High Level Committee member, was a member of the ARS delegation that met with A/S Frazer during her recent visit to Nairobi. Abdurahman Mohamud Faarax "Janaqow" and Dahir Mohamud Gelle, both members of the High Level Committee, are also part of the ARS delegation.

Waging a Battle for
Somali Hearts and Minds

¶5. (SBU) The delegation traveled with three Al-Jazeera journalists to garner favorable media coverage. ARS leaders acknowledged to us they're waging a public diplomacy war with al-Shabaab and others, and were keen to ensure their voices were heard during this important visit. Arabic language Al-Jazeera reports that Sharif called on all Somali groups to lay down their weapons, reconcile and join a national unity movement. He publicly denied the existence of wide-ranging opposition to the Djibouti agreement, and said the ARS will support a unity government provided it puts an end to the current crisis and is capable of serving the Somali people.

¶6. (SBU) The media has widely reported Sharif's remarks on various issues, particularly on the friction between leaders in the ICU. He reportedly said there are mediators in the country and that any

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differences can be resolved through the Quran. Independent religious leaders publicly called on factions associated with the ICU to end internal conflicts and work toward peace. Despite these calls, hard-line elements issued public statements highly critical of Sharif and warning all persons not to work with the "traitorous" ARS leaders. Our contacts within the ARS told us that they expected these media messages, but that the people on the ground nevertheless are responding favorably.

Continuing the Momentum

¶7. (SBU) If weather permits, Sharif plans to depart Jowhar for Beletweyn on November 3 to carry his peace and reconciliation message to the Hiran region. Hardliners have been threatening persons in Hiran, and have warned Sharif directly against traveling there. However, ARS leaders have told us that this visit is crucial to building the necessary conditions for a ceasefire and that Sharif is determined to show his mettle where it counts, on the ground.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Sheikh Sharif's departure for Somalia almost immediately after the IGAD Extraordinary Summit on Somalia came at the urging of A/S Frazer and is an unusual, welcome, and courageous effort to capitalize on positive momentum created by the creation of a unity government. Sharif's willingness to build a constituency in Somalia for the TFG - ARS merger rather than worry first about what positions members of his Alliance will have in that government is a breath of fresh air in a process that has, too much of the time, been excessively preoccupied with status.

RANNEBERGER